

Keeping Optimism and Hope Alive

Now, while Edutopia is about honesty, it is also about solutions. We are not just an online corner in which to vent our frustrations. We are a community of educators seeking to make improvements in both the system and our practice. So in her honor, and in the hopes that we catch others like her before they hit a place where smiles are in drought, I wanted to post a short list of advice in how to preserve happiness even in these difficult times.

1. Pinpoint what you love about education and live in it. I love the kids. So I open my door during my lunch and spend more time with them. I hate the paperwork. So I've devised ways to lessen my load. For one thing, I've gone paperless, and as a symptom, my learning curve keeps me distracted from the scholastic smog.
2. Find others who can offer solutions, not just an ear. We need people who will listen when we are down. But being an ear doesn't solve the problems, and it's important to surround yourself with colleagues who push you to think in new, innovative ways.
3. Pick and choose the news you read. I'm not telling you to cut off your supply of news stories and bloggers and headlines. I am suggesting that you ask yourself if you need a barrage of educational news all the time. And what quality is that news? Is it always reporting the negative? Is it a feed that only vents or one that inspires forward movement? There's a difference, after all. Pick the feeds that help you, not those who only serve to stoke your anger.
4. Know your limits. Know how big your plate is and protect its edges. You need to say yes sometimes, but you also have the right to say, "so what's coming off my plate if I take this on?" You can at least ask before you say no.
5. Never close your door to collaboration. You know how they say that moving elderly people into the hospital can quicken their demise? Closing your door to colleagues is rather like that. The act begins to deteriorate your ability to see the good. When you close the door, you are moving access to positive practices into hospice care.
6. Be supportive of one another. That means you shouldn't add to the smog of negativity or help propel the riot mentality of anger that can be ever-present in a staff lounge. Instead, it means helping a new teacher or answering an email asking for advice. Helping others also helps you. You'll feel better at the end of the day if you've spent it being neighborly to other teachers.
7. Pick your battles. I'm not saying, "don't fight." Of course we fight. But know what you're fighting about, and make sure it's something that you can rebound emotionally from, or you risk losing yourself.
8. Don't get sucked in. As we watch some of our colleagues down sad and angry paths, try to help them, but also find those who haven't gone there yet. Smiles will help keep you aloft, even if the solutions to greater problems are still in progress.

Look, I know that shutting down is a sort of peaceful demonstration. If we as teachers didn't shut down when lines were crossed, if we permit stakeholders to assume that we will always keep the boat afloat even when they take away our deck, you're right. We will continue to be taken advantage of. But we need to find ways to be happy in our day-to-day lives. We need to find ways to continue to support one another and to maintain our positivity.

During a hard day, what gives you reason to smile?